4
Rapprochement through Japanese Re-entry and Investment

4.1 The slow repatriation of Japanese surrendered personnel

The first postwar issue concerning the movement of Japanese nationals in Malaya was the question of the repatriation of Japanese surrendered personnel (JSP). At the end of December 1945, there were 731,554 JSP in the British South-East Asian Command, of which the largest number (121,962) were in Malaya including Singapore. While over 80 per cent (1,663,860) of JSP and civilians in China had returned to Japan by May 1946, and most of the 134,000 JSP in the Philippines were repatriated by the end of 1946, the repatriation from Malaya was not complete until November 1947. This was the last official repatriation from the whole area of South-East Asia.2

The US which pursued the policy of early repatriation of JSP from the areas under the control of SCAP, including China and the Philippines, had regarded the concentration of JSP as a potential source of disturbances. So did the Dutch government of the East Indies. However, Mountbatten as SACSEA dismissed such fear as excessive and expressed his confidence in the ‘exemplary behaviour’ of the JSP in Malaya and the effect of continued British ‘indoctrination’ policy to make them ‘fully realise the extent of their military defeat’.1 In fact, Mountbatten saw great advantages in the retention of JSP in Malaya, which would outweigh drawbacks such as declining morale among the JSP.

As mentioned in section 3.1, Britain at this time was suffering from a grave shortage of manpower in her expanding imperial obligations. Reconstruction was most urgently needed in Malaya, especially at the Singapore base as the stronghold of British influence in South-East Asia. However, it was impossible to recruit sufficient local labour to cover various reconstruction projects because of malnutrition and because of
the drain of local labour to civil concerns such as tin mines and rubber plantations which were making a rapid recovery. Therefore, the large number of JSP were a ready alternative.

They were utilized as civil labour for food production and for technical works at power, gas, and pumping stations. During the labour unrest in Singapore at the end of 1945, JSP were introduced to replace strikers. Some labour corps of JSP were assigned dirty jobs such as clearing heaps of filth in the streets of Singapore and reclamation works in remote areas in northern Malaya. A British official who had returned to Singapore wrote that the assignment of filthy tasks to JSP ‘helped to demonstrate to the [local] people over a wide area that Japan had really, at last, lost precious face’. At the same time, JSP were also used in strategically important areas as a service workforce for military facilities. They worked on the construction of soldiers’ accommodation and an airfield in Kuala Lumpur, on the rehabilitation of the naval base and dockyard in Singapore, and as labourers in the ports. In Sumatra, which was also under the South-East Asia Command, Mountbatten even formed a Guards Division of JSP and used this as a police force under the direction of British troops, a policy which was strongly opposed by the Americans and British liberals.

By September 1946, Mountbatten and the Chiefs of Staff came to consider that the withdrawal of JSP labour would ‘seriously affect the operation of the Singapore base’ and that ‘the rehabilitation of public services and the speedy recovery of commerce in the Far East [especially the entrepôt trade in Singapore], depends, to a great extent, on the availability of JSP labour in that area’. In April 1946, Mountbatten had succeeded in obtaining Cabinet Office permission to retain 100,000 JSP in his command with the largest share of 47,000 in Malaya until the end of 1946 or early 1947. In July, he further requested the extension of the retention until the latter half of 1947. The request was supported by the Governor-General of Malaya and the Special Commissioner for the UK in South-East Asia as well as the Chiefs of Staff.

The British Far Eastern (Official) Committee (FEOC), in charge of policy coordination with other Allied Powers, expected American objection to the usage of surrendered personnel as labour for a prolonged period. Therefore, while emphasizing the working capacity and indispensability of JSP, the FEOC tried to justify the retention on the grounds that:

the Japanese are responsible for having devastated and disorganised the territories of South East Asia; they should themselves therefore contribute to their reconstruction and rehabilitation. In particular,